



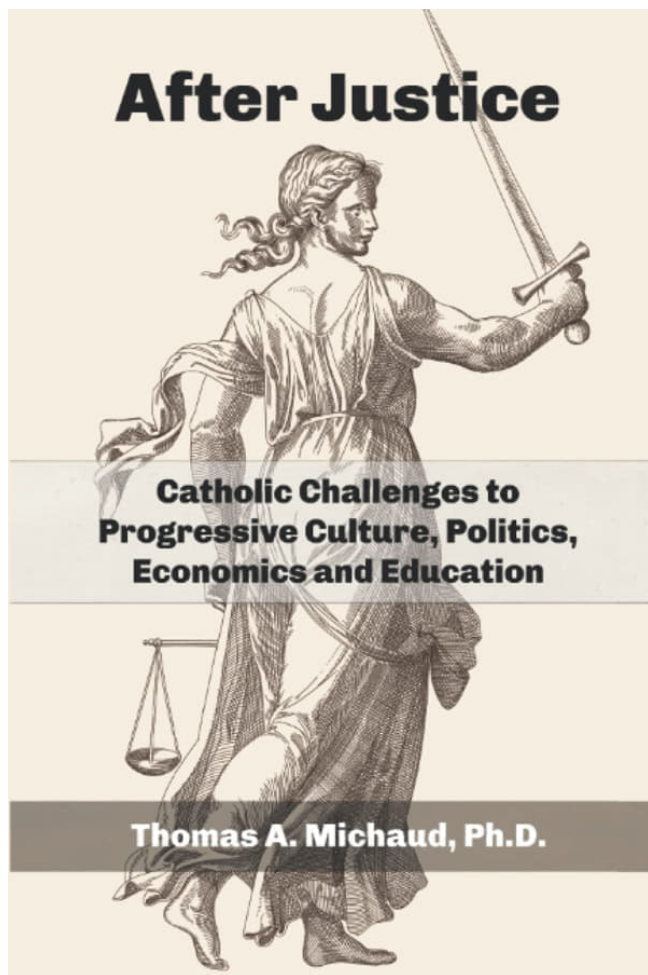
THE CATHOLIC CHALLENGE TO PROGRESSIVISM

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Thomas Michaud's book, *After Justice: Catholic Challenges to Progressive Culture, Politics, Economics and Education*, is an attempt to address the decline of Western Civilization. Michaud believes that this decline has occurred incrementally, and he is intent on identifying the reasons for it. Convinced that ideas have consequences, Michaud records how competing ideologies have upset the West's moral compass. The most conspicuous of these ideologies is Progressivism. For the author Progressivism is something of an umbrella term covering several left-leaning visions of individual and communal life.

Since this volume is a kind of polemic, one might expect it to have a bellicose tone, followed by a mournful quality. But to the contrary, Michaud's book is curiously bright and hopeful, despite its critical aims. Michaud's polemic is buoyed by its enthusiastic reliance on Catholic social teaching and Catholic wisdom in general. Michaud is confident that the long historical arc of Catholic wisdom provides the resources to teach how the decline of the West can be arrested.



Michaud discovers in the Catholic tradition the principles of a rich theological and philosophical personalism. On this earth God's glory is most manifest in a human life fully lived. In personalism the wonder of the mysterious depths of human person as an embodied soul, endowed with intellect and will, is the metaphysical foundation for explaining human nature and civilized life. Accordingly, personalism, comprehensively understood, is the remedy for what ails culture. This book is basically a reminder that Western Civilization is at its heart Christendom, a vision of society built on Jesus Christ as the standard of humanity. Personalism applies its principles on cultural, economic, and political life, since the triad of culture, economics, and government constitutes society and its development. Michaud's volume shows that Western Culture now is in distress because it has forgotten the person as the proper foundation of this triad.

Upon summarizing the book's structure, an Introduction and Seven Sections of essays, one can see how Michaud in his own way prosecutes this triad. The Introduction provides autobiographical details which illuminate key elements of Michaud's own pilgrimage as an educator, philosopher, and Christian intellectual. Next follows the book's seven broad sections, each containing a "Section Introduction," which is exceedingly helpful. The Sections cover a wide variety of subject matter. Section I: Lectures and Editorials treats issues ranging from electoral politics to sports. Section II Marcelian Perspectives speaks to the influence of Gabriel Marcel on Michaud's philosophical work. Marcel's influence is evident one way or another throughout the entire volume. Section III: Leadership Formation summarizes reflections on the nature of leadership, a subject on which Michaud has lectured extensively, appreciating that principles of leadership disclose how organizations, including civilization itself, can succeed. Section IV: Environmentalism and Realism, a discussion Michaud takes up because of the many ideological assumptions implicit in the environmentalist movement. While environmentalists profess to be green, they also tend to be red since they hope to commandeer big government to advance their various agendas. Section V: Critiques of Progressive Politics, Pluralism, Political Economy and Revolution is a set of essays wherein Michaud speculates about the reasons for social decline. Out of the plurality of essays in this section, Michaud recommends five of them for special consideration: "The Problematic Politics of Postmodern Pluralism," "Diversity within the United States' Culture and Politics," "Democracy Needs Religion" "Blasts from the Preclassical Past: Why Contemporary Economics Education Should Listen to Preclassical Thought," and "Anatomy of the Progressive Revolution."

The first two of these five essays express Michaud's conviction that tolerance and justice have been altered by Progressive culture to insinuate a social philosophy akin to Marxism, especially in the form of identity politics. These essays also suggest Michaud's agreement with John Adams that America will thrive so long as her citizens remain a moral and religious people. As a group, these five essays consider how Left-Wing ideology depersonalizes society, the effects of which are evident in the past few generations. Michaud salutes the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville and Michael Novak for their implicit personalism, especially evident in the way they worry about the erosion of morality and the dignity of the person in economics. The fifth essay reminds us that Progressivism is not just a movement aiming at reform but seeks transformation of Western Culture.

Section VI: Progressivism's Challenges to Education and Millennials' Happiness relates how questions of social organization impact individual happiness. The book closes with a fascinating Short Story which narrates an event from Michaud's autobiographical record.

The persistent theme percolating throughout Michaud's book is that political correctness is a toxin. Political correctness is not just an annoyance caused by ideological busy bodies. It is an assault on truth by the manipulation of language. By means of that manipulation, people become confused and social standards become transformed, which causes confusion as people habituated in traditional language are bemused by its change. Political correctness in its extreme is Orwellian, represented by Winston Smith conceding in [1984](#) that indeed $2 + 2 = 5$. By control of language, authorities can control thought. This outcome is now evident in the way universities equivocate on truth and turn education into indoctrination.

A keen insight is Michaud's observation that in recent times, champions of political correctness have refined two social tools to serve their purpose of transforming Western society. These tools are (1) a modified, ideological adaptation of *tolerance* and (2) an alteration of fairness in the form of *social justice*.

Tolerance and social justice are subtle devices since they exploit the hope that people will assume that tolerance and social justice today mean what they have meant for centuries. Who would oppose openness and fairness, which principles tolerance and justice imply? However, tolerance today and social justice are a new kind of pluralism and fairness and are effectively equivocations on the ancient meanings of those terms. The politically correct are clever, which is demonstrated by using terms which have appeal because people think they signify what they have traditionally meant. But by the sleight of hand of Leftist ideologues, the meanings of justice and tolerance have changed.

Justice classically means relating to people in a way that they deserve. But social justice is different. It interprets desert not in terms of merit but in terms of identity politics. Consider that political correctness adds an adjectival qualifier which alters meaning. When the word "social" modifies justice, a different meaning is attached to fairness. Traditionally, justice is an individual's habit or virtue of being respectful of others, who deserve respect. Social justice, on the other hand, is a kind of identity politics, in which one divides people into groups and stereotypes them. Once the groups are stereotyped, the effort is made, often by means of government, to favor some groups and disfavor others. The virtue of justice classically understood implies impartiality and equality of standards in the application of fairness. But this is not how social justice applies today. Instead, social justice suspects traditional ideas about impartiality associated with meritocracy or earned desert. Social justice comfortably accepts partiality and inequality of application, which the politically correct call "equity," a principle inspired by the aim of restorative justice, the remedy of past wrongs perpetrated by some groups against others.

Aware of these points, Michaud regards social justice as a Marxist trope. By using politically correct language, social justice insinuates that justice is about groups, not individuals. Because human beings are social animals, as Aristotle long ago observed, there has always been sociability implicit in the idea of justice. But the status and significance of the individual was nonetheless at the heart of the classical meaning of justice because it involved individual judgment and habit formation. Social justice, however, is a Marxist tool to eliminate the individual and reduce justice to a matter of group identities and relations. For example, when a teacher discovers that a student is cheating in class, he or she ought not judge that the student is an individual wrongdoer. That would imply that he has autonomy and moral agency. Such judgment is simplistic and does not consider how we are shaped by social forces. No, it is not the cheater's fault. It is society's fault, which has somehow made the student a victim. If schools weren't compromised by an unfair social system, students wouldn't cheat. Not surprisingly, victimology is common in the exercise of social justice, a point of view that echoes Vladimir Lenin's conviction that the proletariat cannot commit crimes because of their disadvantage before bourgeoisie power. Of course, the radical political implication is that when injustice occurs, social justice warriors cry out for big government intervention to remedy the problem. Hence, social justice becomes an excuse to expand government. As a tool of unbridled political correctness, it can encourage formation of a totalitarian state.

Tolerance is another classical virtue that has been malformed by political correctness. Historically, tolerance was understood as a virtue of justice which impels a person to allow something he disagrees with because, if he were to disallow it, a kind of injustice could follow. In the spirit of traditional tolerance whole peoples with profoundly different beliefs and values have gotten along and have even lived as neighbors. But this vision of tolerance is less popular today, especially when ideological disagreements are the issue. Today, those who profess to be among the most tolerant are often content to seek refuge in tribalistic separateness. Among Progressives, tolerance is a kind of virtue signaling, a way in which a person authenticates himself as an enlightened human being by accepting the directives of politically correct thinking.

Accordingly, Progressives, while preaching tolerance, often appear intolerant. For them, tolerance is not a species of traditional justice but a politically correct instrument to transform society. Of course, one could say that it is a species of social justice. In this way, tolerance conforms to the Leftist agenda to transform the West. Hence, the Progressive's exercise of intolerance is quite coherent with their own worldview, even though it is out of step with the classical view of tolerance. Conservatives often do not understand this progressive application of tolerance, dismissing the Progressive's attitudes and practices as inconsistent. But Progressives are consistent according to their own imperative: be

intolerant of those who champion traditional tolerance, which is based on corrupt, benighted values. A tolerant person, as Progressives see it, is enlightened, and an enlightened person knows that intolerant people should not be tolerated. Intolerant people are unenlightened, and they are people who do not support or advance the interests of Progressive politics and culture. As a result, they are a social menace. So why should society tolerate them? An intolerant person, on their view, is indeed a regressive person, someone, like a practicing Christian, who tries to maintain traditional values and institutional beliefs that, while they pass as civilized, are, in fact, benighted.

Michaud's book is a reminder that conservatives could help themselves by better understanding these nuances about tolerance in the Progressive movement. Instead, conservatives tend to complain tirelessly about inconsistency and censorship, failing to grasp and address the deeper motivations in Progressivism. Conservatives must recognize that they are dealing with a collision of worldviews. The Progressive worldview has endured longer than many conservatives realize, having emanated out of the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose ideological heir was Karl Marx.

Conservatives would do well to appreciate how champions of political correctness play them. Michaud appreciates how political correctness has taken over universities. Allan Bloom, in his instructive book, [*The Closing of the American Mind*](#), explains in detail how the University became a stifling culture against free thought, changing from an institution that sought to instill liberal education, freedom and independence of thought, to a system repressing the exchange of ideas. This happened, Bloom explains, as Leftists indoctrinated students in relativism, claiming there is no truth, and that no idea is more defensible than any other. Bloom explains that this relativism, akin to nihilism, would nullify educators' efforts to instill moral and intellectual ideals in students. The only virtue, intellectual or moral, that students wanted taught, was openness, a curriculum without judgments. The students would pay a price as this relativism became the cultural norm at the university, an outcome Bloom captured in the subtitle of his book: *How Higher Education Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Without moral judgment there is no nutrition for the soul.

Michaud understands that this is what happened to the universities. But, of course, the strategy of political correctness recognized that this nihilism was just an episode. No culture can exist without judgments and constraints. The politically correct just pretended for a while that the university was a bastion of non-judgmentalism. After removing traditions and curricula on grounds that they were biased, the new politically correct leaders took over most universities and imposed a bureaucracy of bias and censorship of their own, mainly through the formation of programs and committees that might

make old-time fascists envious. For example, universities made traditional educators remove speech codes and standards. But they celebrated this removal only until they came to dominate the university and inflict innumerable speech codes, behavioral restrictions, and censorship rules of a sundry kind. The politically correct played the Rope-a-Dope game to perfection. The conservatives on campus, wanting to appear open, accommodating, and non-judgmental (in short, wanting to appear "Progressive-Lite"), fell for the strategy: from radical openness to repression in two generations.

Conservatives would do well to learn to resist political correctness at every turn and not play the game by its rules. This is one of the lessons of Michaud's instructive book: conservatives must learn to fight back, and with intelligence.

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[Featured](#): *The Liberation of St. Peter*, by Antonio de Bellis; painted ca. early 1640s.

